

Chess Prodigies

Edward Winter

(2005)

We offer a pictorial A to Z of chess prodigies up to *circa*1950. The various claims are reported 'flatly', i.e. with no expression of suspicion or incredulity at any of the more fanciful statements found in print over the years. The term prodigy is, moreover, interpreted here quite loosely, and we have been more inclined to include 'older youngsters' from the nineteenth century than from the twentieth. First presented in C.N. 3812 (on 3 July 2005), this directory will be expanded from time to time, and any additions, criticisms or other comments from readers will be appreciated.

Allen, Richard

C.N. 2845 culled, from page 84 of *CHESS*, January 1951, a game won by Richard Allen in Normanton in 1950, at the age of six.

Ashby, Master

An account of the son of F.L. Ashby of Cheddleton, England, who learned the moves of chess at the age of three, appeared on page 40 of the February 1920 *BCM*. See pages 54-55 of *Chess Explorations*.

Baird, Lilian

Lilian Baird (1881-1977) was referred to on page 130 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*. An early composition by her was on page 103 of the February 1891 *BCM*. Four of her problems were published on page 14 of *The Chess Bouquet* by F.R. Gittins (London, 1897), from which the photograph below is taken:



Lilian Baird

C.N. 3818:

Chris Ravilious (Eastbourne, England) reports that in 1995 he brought out a monograph on a prodigy mentioned in C.N. 3812, Lilian Baird, under the title *Lilian An Episode in Chess Problem History*.

Billikopf, Jacob

Born *circa* 1882, Jacob Billikopf was featured on page 335 of the November 1897 *American Chess Magazine*, which praised him highly. See page 130 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*.



Jacob Billikopf

Blumenschein, Ernest

The conclusion to a game by Ernest Blumenschein against W.H. Smith in Dayton on 25 February 1890 was warmly received by Steinitz on page 155 of the May 1890 *International Chess Magazine*. Blumenschein was aged 15 at the time. See page 78 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Boardman, Harry A.

The problemist Harry A. Boardman (1863-1935) was discussed in C.N. 3410, where several of his compositions as a child were given. He developed into a prominent figure in the problem world. The sketch below was published on page 1374 of the *Scientific American Supplement*, 25 August 1877.



Harry A. Boardman

Boži•, Molorad

From page 453 of the November 1934 *BCM*: ‘Yugoslavia. A new infant chess prodigy has been discovered at Belgrade, Molorad Boži•, the six-year-old son of an innkeeper in that city. Though he is already known as “little Alekhine”, it is perhaps best to await developments. Not all Samuel Rechevskis make good as he has done.’

Brereton, Master

A game won by him, at the age of seven, against his father, W.D. Brereton, in Pittsburg in 1898 was given on page 140 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*, from the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* of 10 February 1898.

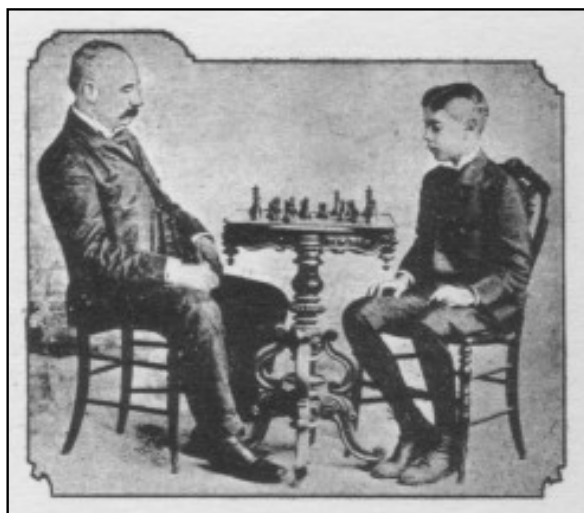
Capablanca, José Raúl

A fine set of photographs of the young Capablanca accompanied an article about him by Olga Capablanca on pages 20-37 of *Chessworld*, May-June 1964. Almost all of his games as a prodigy were published in *The Unknown Capablanca* by D. Hooper and D. Brandreth (London, 1975). For additional data see our 1989 book on Capablanca, which also contained some rare photographs of the prodigy. Five further specimens are given below:



José Raúl Capablanca, aged ten

The next photograph was published on page 142 of *El Fígaro*, 30 March 1902. Capablanca is standing on the far right during a game between Corzo (Juan or Enrique?) and Manuel Márquez Sterling. Seated from left to right are: José Díaz, Eduardo Delgado, the Marqués de la Graciosa, Ramón Pardo and Gonzalo Herrera.



Antonio Fiol and José Raúl Capablanca

The picture below shows members of the Havana Chess Club in the cable match against the Manhattan Chess Club in April 1903: Manuel Márquez Sterling, Antonio Fiol, Enrique Corzo, Juan Corzo, José Antonio Blanco and José Raúl Capablanca.



José Raúl Capablanca

Cross, James

James Cross came to prominence as a 16-year-old, being praised on page 32 of the December 1946 *Chess Review*. Two of his games were given on pages 125-126 of *A Chess Omnibus*.



James Cross

del Sel, Luís Enrique

Page 374 of the October 1921 *BCM* reported from the April-June 1921 *Revista del Club Argentino de Ajedrez* that Luís Enrique del Sel, born in Santa Rosa on 25 July 1908, learned chess at the age of nine and was a strong player. See page 55 of *Chess Explorations*.

Derrickson, George H.

The winner of a famous brilliancy over the board, George H. Derrickson was also an accomplished problemist. He died in Philadelphia in 1862 aged about 17. See pages 229-230 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves* and pages 343-344 of *A Chess Omnibus*. The photograph of him below (the only one known) is reproduced courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



George H. Derrickson

Eichholz, Elliot Franklin

A problem composed by Elliot Franklin Eichholz at the age of five was published on page 132 of the May-June 1917 *American Chess Bulletin*. See page 234 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*.

Elsner, Max

Page 356 of the November 1885 *Deutsche Schachzeitung* gave a game Max Elsner won against his mother in Klein Wanzleben on 13 November 1885 when he was six and three-quarters, although, in an unresolved discrepancy, the magazine also stated that he was born on 10 February 1871. See pages 129-130 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*.

Fairhurst, William Albert

A victory by William Albert Fairhurst at the age of 18 against Boris Kostić (Manchester, 1922)

was given on page 230 of the *Chess Amateur*, May 1922 and on page 80 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Fleischman, Simon and Blanca

Pages 52-53 of *Chess Explorations* quoted from *La Estrategia Mexicana*, October 1876 a reference to 'Miss Blanca Fleischmann [*sic*], the celebrated and distinguished girl from Buffalo in the United States', a problemist and player. As noted in C.N. 3402, the chess column by Sam Loyd in *Scientific American Supplement*, 19 January 1878 (page 1708) gave a problem by Simon Fleischman and reported that both he and his sister had 'developed a remarkable aptitude for chess and have published many excellent problems'.

Flores, Rodrigo

Rodrigo Flores was born in Chile in 1913. His activities as a prodigy were presented in C.N. 3046, with four games played in the 1920s.



Rodrigo Flores

Graef, Charles and Frederic

A game between these brothers (aged 13 and 14 respectively) in Long Island *circa* 1857 was given on pages 241-242 of the *Chess Monthly*, August 1857 and reproduced on page 76 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Griffith, William H.

Born on 18 January 1927, a prodigy from Memphis who was able to set up the 32 chess pieces correctly at the age of two and a half, according to a report in the *Commercial Appeal* of 9 March 1930 which was reproduced on page 84 of the April 1930 *American Chess Bulletin*. See pages 130-131 of *Chess Explorations*.

Gromer, Aristide

C.N.s 2945 and 2946 discussed Aristide Gromer (born in 1909), on the basis of reports in *La Stratégie*, the *Chess Amateur*, the *BCM* and the *American Chess Bulletin*. The score of his loss to V. Kahn in Paris, 1923 was included.

Gueffier

As a 12-year-old he drew against Janowsky in a simultaneous exhibition in Paris (*BCM*, March 1894, page 89). As mentioned on page 130 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*, it remains to be established whether he was the same player who drew against Emanuel Lasker in Paris in 1909.

Hall, J.

The daughter of W.W. Hall, whom she beat, when she was aged nine, in a game at McGregor, Texas in 1888. It was published in the *St John Globe* of 20 April 1888 and reprinted on page 77 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Johnson, Craig Adams

Page 35 of the *American Chess Bulletin*, February 1919 stated that at the age of six Craig Adams Johnson of Utica drew his game against Frank Marshall in a simultaneous exhibition.

Kirkham, J. Henry

When aged 13 J. Henry Kirkham of Newington was mentioned on page 334 of the *American Chess Journal*, May 1879 as a good player and problem-solver.

Lengden, John

Born in Manchester on 30 October 1902. A biographical note and game were given on pages 119-120 of the March 1912 *BCM*. See page 54 of *Chess Explorations*.



John Lengden

Leonard, James A.

A New York player (1841-1862) who was discussed on pages 133-140 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves* and was notable for his blindfold prowess. A monograph on him by John S. Hilbert is being published by McFarland & Company, Inc. later in 2005.



James A. Leonard

MacLeod, Nicholas

Nicholas MacLeod (1870-1965) was a participant at New York, 1889. An earlier tournament performance of his was highly praised on page 230 of the June 1885 *BCM*. Jeremy Gaige provided a biography of MacLeod in C.N. 479.

Martínez, Charles S.

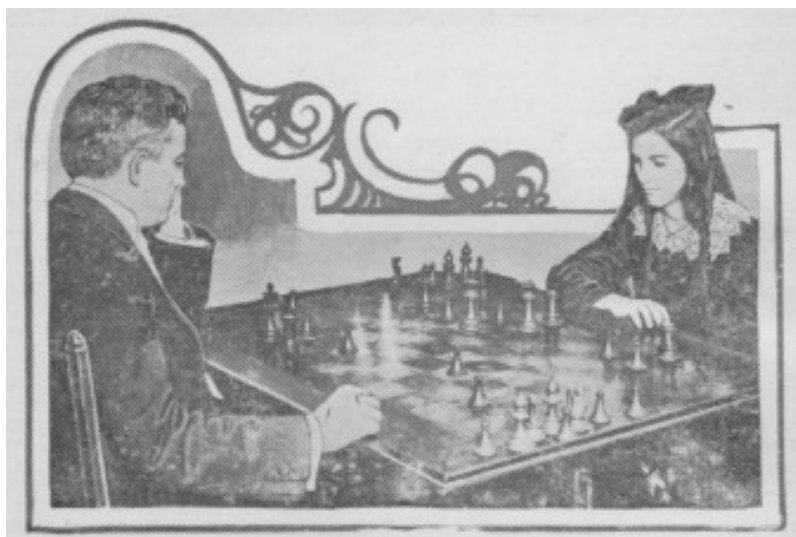
Charles S. Martínez (1868-1941) was the son of Dión M. Martínez. A combinational finish to his game against W.E. Wayte in Germantown, 1885 was published by Steinitz on page 153 of the May 1885 *International Chess Magazine*. See page 78 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Mikeladze, Iberie

La Stratégie, 15 August 1885 (page 247) reported that Iberie Mikeladze was an eight-year-old prodigy, the son of Prince Mikeladze. A game of his against Bakradze in Kutais, 1886 was given. See page 76 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Mora Iturralde, María Teresa

The Cuban prodigy to whom Capablanca gave lessons, as he reported in *My Chess Career*. See page 56 of *Chess Explorations* and pages 122-123 of *A Chess Omnibus*. Her year of birth is usually given as 1907, but C.N. 3468 discussed the evidence that she was born five years earlier.



María Teresa Mora and Edward Everett (November 1916)

Morphy, Paul Charles

Almost everything known about Morphy as a prodigy is to be found in *Paul Morphy The Pride and Sorrow of Chess* by D. Lawson (New York, 1976). As far as we are aware, no picture of Morphy as a child has been found.

Muffang, André

A game won by André Muffang (1897-1989) against A. de Poplawski in Paris on 26 March 1913 was published in *La Stratégie*, April 1913, pages 146-147. See page 79 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Nadel, Siegfried

In its report on the Hastings, 1930-31 congress, pages 63-64 of the February 1931 *BCM* stated that 'S. Nadel, the 16-year-old boy from Berlin, gave a simultaneous blindfold display against eight players. Most of the games had to be adjudicated, the final figures being: 2 wins, 4 draws and 2 losses. The players who scored wins against him were Mrs Wheelwright and D.A. Breach.' Page 60 of the same issue recorded that Nadel had finished last in the Major A tournament in Hastings,

but: 'He is only 16 years of age and has been playing chess for only two years. To be a blindfold exponent on such short experience is really remarkable.'

Napier, William Ewart

Comprehensive coverage of William Ewart Napier as a prodigy was provided in *Napier The Forgotten Chessmaster* by John S. Hilbert (Yorklyn, 1997).

Neimark, Celia

Page 171 of the *American Chess Bulletin*, September-October 1921 reported that Celia Neimark, aged seven, had defeated the Ohio State Champion, Irving Spero. The score was reproduced on pages 79-80 of *A Chess Omnibus*. The photograph of her below in Cleveland (with an inverted board) was published on page 206 of the December 1921 issue of the *Bulletin*:



Celia Neimark

Norton, Frank

A problem composer born in 1866 who gained attention in the 1870s. See page 366 of *A Chess Omnibus* and C.N.s 3402 and 3406 for further information (including problems and games).



Frank Norton

Pomar Salamanca, Arturo

Born in 1931. The mid-1940s saw the publication of two monographs, *Mis Cincuenta Partidas con Maestros* (Madrid, 1945) and *La Vida de Arturito Pomar* by J.M. Fuentes and J. Ganzo (Madrid, 1946). Two specimens of his play were given on pages 114-116 of *A Chess Omnibus*.



Arturo Pomar, aged five



Arturo Pomar in play against Alexander Alekhine, Gijón, July 1944



Savielly Tartakower and Arturo Pomar, London, 1946

Pomoschnikov, Pavel

C.N. 3818:

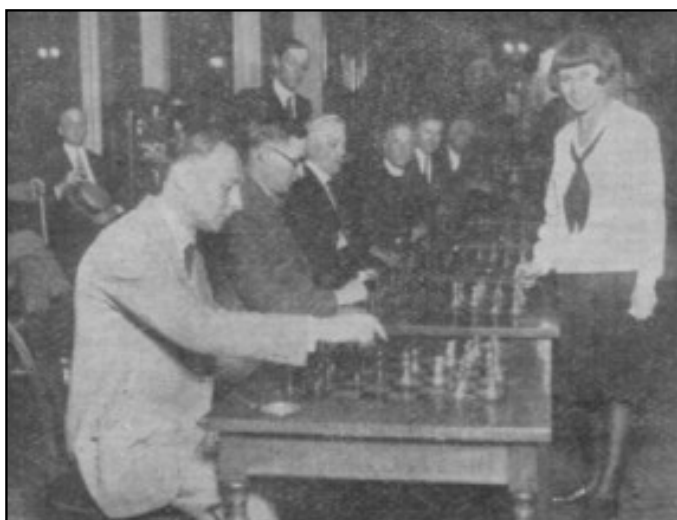
Information is sought on a youngster referred to by Nikolai Grekov in his reminiscences quoted (from where?) by J. du Mont on pages 14-16 of *Capablanca's Hundred Best Games* by H. Golombek (London, 1947):

‘The following curious episode took place during the 1936 Moscow tournament. In the interval a 13-year-old schoolboy, Pavel Pomoschnikov, approached Capablanca and in fluent French challenged the ex-champion to a game. Not wanting to distress the boy, Capablanca consented. Having lost three games in succession, Pavel Pomoschnikov demanded a handicap of a queen. Capablanca replied that a queen was too much. The boy then solemnly declared that in ten years he would play against Capablanca as an equal and with better success. The Cuban champion

advised the young champion to prepare well for the coming match and presented him with an autographed copy of his book on chess.'

Reeve, Birdie

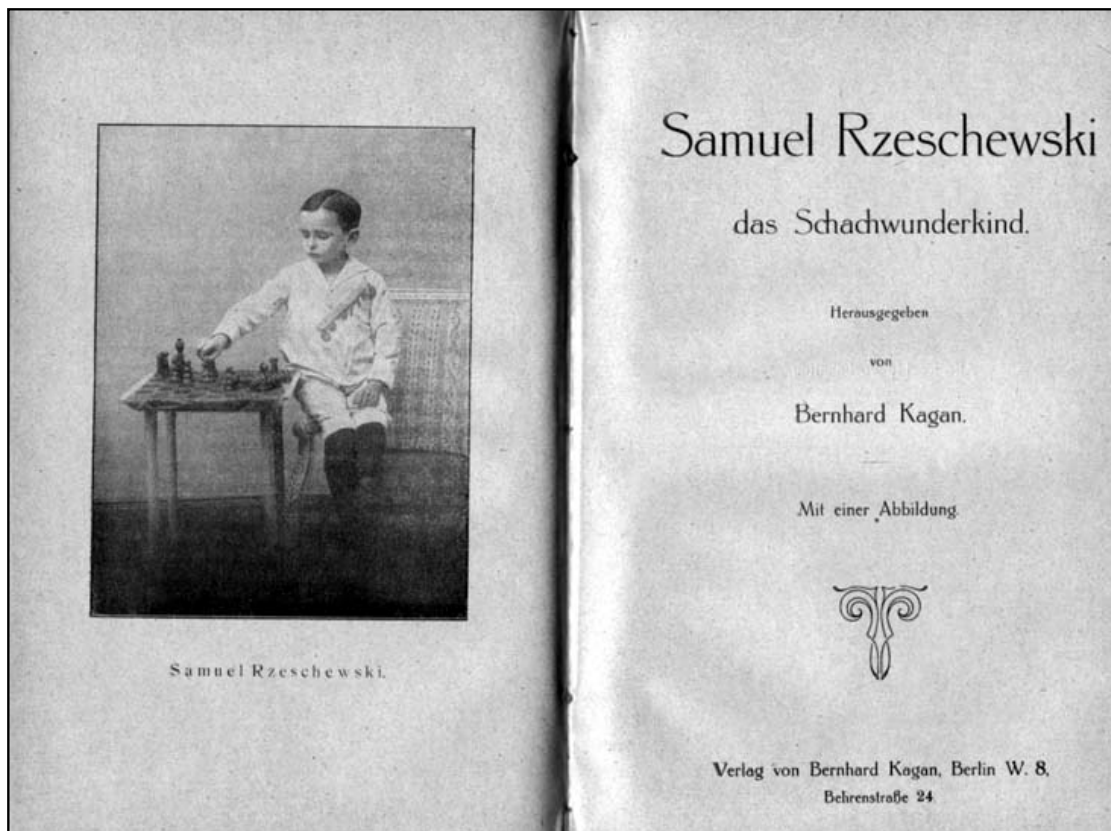
Chessplayer and vaudeville typist. See C.N.s 3572, 3612, 3647 and 3668.



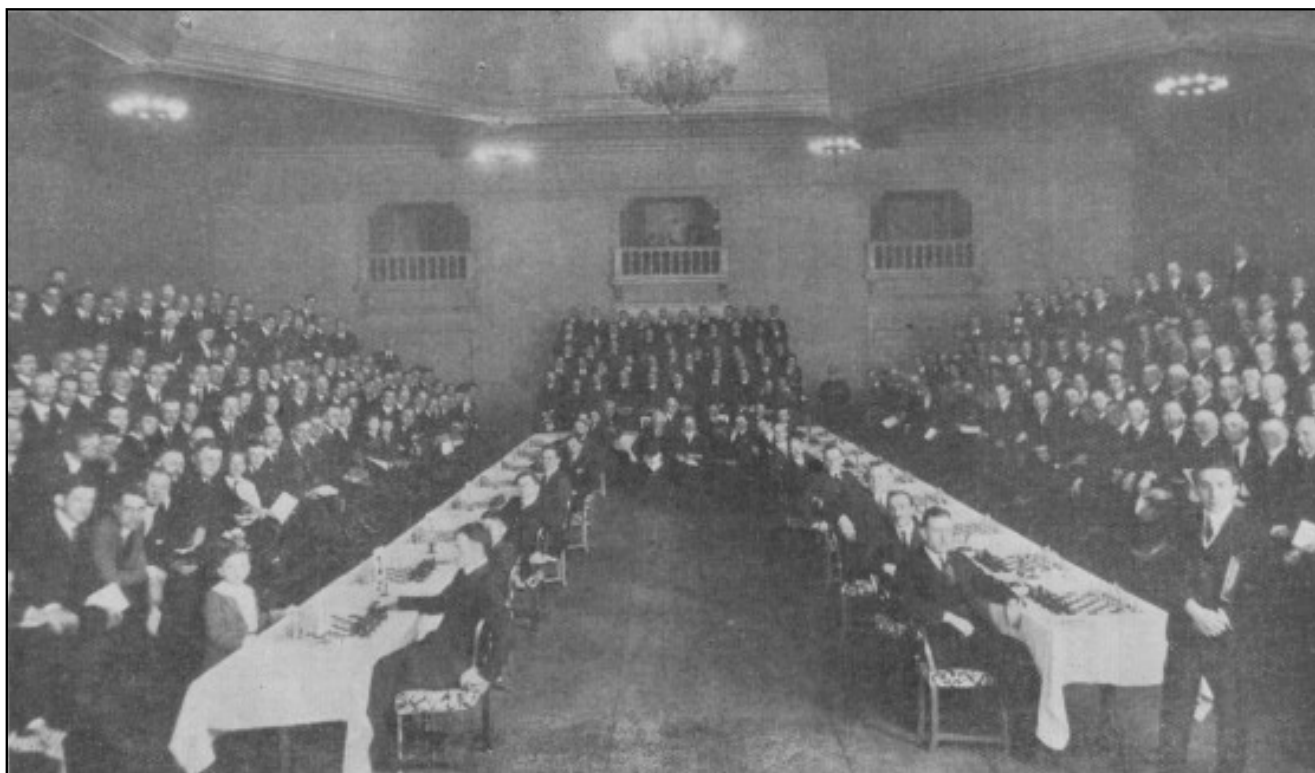
Birdie Reeve

Reshevsky, Samuel

A selection of games played by Reshevsky between 1920 and 1922 was presented in C.N. 1518 (pages 61-66 of *Chess Explorations*). For the most comprehensive collection, see pages 1-19 of *Samuel Reshevsky* by Stephen W. Gordon (Jefferson, 1997). An addition was given on page 98 of *A Chess Omnibus* (an item based on pages 122-127 of *La Stratégie*, June 1920). A colourful report from page 2 of the *Boston Post* of 4 April 1921 was quoted on pages 258-259 of *Chess Explorations*, which also referred to the claims seen in the 1990s, though seldom since, that Reshevsky was born not in 1911 but in 1909. Below is the title page of a rare early monograph on the prodigy, published by Bernhard Kagan in Berlin in 1920:



The photograph below was taken before a 20-board simultaneous display by Reshevsky in Cleveland on 27 January 1921:



Roberts, John Drew

John Drew Roberts (1864-1931) was discussed, with several specimens of his play, on pages 131-133 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*. For a further example, see page 77 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Rohner, W.A.

W.A. Rohner of Hamilton, Australia was mentioned on page 149 of *La Stratégie*, April-May 1879 and page 334 of the *American Chess Journal*, May 1879 as a 12-year-old who had won a local tournament.

Rolfe, William J.

A photograph of William J. Rolfe Jr., taken when he was aged three, appeared on page 39 of the February 1932 *American Chess Bulletin*. See also page 143 of *A Chess Omnibus*.



William J. Rolfe

Salot, Henry

A six-and-a-half-year-old prodigy from Philadelphia, according to a report on page 275 of the August 1916 *BCM*, taken from *L'Eco degli Scacchi*. See page 54 of *Chess Explorations*.

Saunders, Elaine

Born in 1926, Elaine Saunders was a celebrated prodigy in the 1930s, and her exploits were well documented in British chess periodicals of the time. On 29 February 1952 she married the chess writer David Brine Pritchard (*CHESS*, April 1952, page 129).



Elaine Saunders



Elaine Saunders and Vera Menchik



Elaine Saunders

C.N. 3817:

‘She’s a genius.’ That was Alekhine’s observation on the 12-year-old Elaine Saunders after playing her in a simultaneous exhibition in London on 22 January 1938. From page 190 of *CHESS*, 14 February 1938:

‘Dr Alekhine was televised by the British Broadcasting Corporation in January, “lookers-in” seeing him make, once again, the move which regained for him the world’s championship.

On 22 January he played simultaneously against 30 of Kent’s strongest players and

after four and a half hours had won all but three ... Twelve-year-old Elaine Saunders, British girl champion, covered herself with glory by holding out to the very end, succumbing in a rook-and-pawn endgame in the very last game to finish. Dr Alekhine, speaking afterwards, said, "She's a genius".

... [Elaine Saunders] became famous overnight – as far as the general public was concerned – as a result of her fine show against Alekhine. Pictures of her with eye to a telescope, boxing a punchball, walloping her father blindfold, etc. were published in many of the daily papers.'

A photograph (featuring Alekhine in play against R.C. Noel-Johnson, Elaine Saunders, C. Chapman, H.H. Cole, H. Israel and W.J.E. Yeeles) of the display at the Charing Cross Hotel, London was published on page 115 of the March 1938 *BCM*:



We have never seen the moves of her game against Alekhine, but below is a victory she scored in a simultaneous display given by another eminent figure:

Rudolf Spielmann – Elaine Saunders

Occasion?

Sicilian Defence

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 d6 5 c4 Nf6 6 Nc3 g6 7 Be2 Bg7 8 Be3 O-O 9 Nxc6 bxc6 10 h4 Qa5 11 Qd2 Ng4



12 h5 Nxe3 13 Qxe3 Qb4 14 Qd2 Be6 15 hxg6 fxg6 16 a3 Qc5 17 O-O-O Rxf2 18 b4 Qe5 19 White resigns.

This score is taken from a feature on Elaine Saunders on pages 263-264 of the *Australasian Chess Review*, 31 October 1938, which commented:

‘We do not intend to wallow in newspaper sensationalism about this little champion. Our readers will be more interested in the following remarks made by her father, Mr H. de B. Saunders, in response to our request for Elaine’s photo.

“I should like to stress the point that despite the reports of the ‘sensational press’ Elaine is quite an ordinary child, and not a ‘prodigy’. She is fond of all outdoor sports, and is especially keen on swimming, riding, skating and ball games. All the same, she has chess to thank for making innumerable friends both at home and abroad. She is playing three sets of correspondence chess with German opponents at the moment; all of whom are otherwise quite unknown to her.

Her successes have been almost entirely due to the kind and patient coaching of our friend Mr C.D. Locock (whose *Imagination in Chess* you have reviewed in the *ACR*). Although a veteran, Mr Locock still finds time to visit girls’ schools and teach chess; his service in this direction being entirely voluntary. Without his help, Elaine would never have risen above the ranks of ‘woodshifters’ and she bears him a considerable debt of gratitude.”

Below is the illustration which accompanied the article in the *Australasian Chess Review*:



Elaine Saunders

In 1939 P.W. Sergeant dedicated to her his book *An Introduction to The Endgame at Chess*, as follows:

‘Dedicated to Miss Elaine Zelia Saunders because she doesn’t (at present) like the Endgame.’

We wonder if any other chess book has been dedicated to somebody as young as 13.

C.N. 3826:

Elaine Saunders gave an account of her game against Alekhine on page 224 of *British Chess* by G. S. Botterill, D.N.L. Levy, J.M. Rice and M.J. Richardson (Oxford, 1983):

‘The incident which received the most publicity was the “affair Alekhine”. Most of the pre-war giants were kindly if a little condescending towards me but the new world champion – he had just regained the title from Euwe – showed me no mercy. He took on 30 Kent players at the Charing Cross Hotel and after five hours demolished all except myself. [In fact, Alekhine’s final score was +27 –2 =1.] The ending was equal. He stood over our board and glowered. “Give the child a draw”, said someone in Russian in the audience, which despite the midnight hour were everywhere on chairs and even under tables. “I know what I am doing”, came the reply, and of course he did. I lost.’

Spalding, F.S.L.

A prodigy solver from Plymouth, England who was discussed on page 142 of the March 1902 *BCM*. See page 54 of *Chess Explorations*.

Stella, Mademoiselle

An account was published on page 177 of *La Stratégie*, 15 June 1895. See C.N. 3145.

Sumar, Julio

Born in 1932, Julio Sumar (from Peru) was discussed, with an illustrative game, on page 254 of the August 1947 *BCM*. See pages 55-56 of *Chess Explorations*.

Thompson, C.

On page 219 of the July 1890 *International Chess Magazine* Steinitz published a game won by C. Thompson against J.D. Elwell in Brooklyn, 1890. Thompson was aged 18. See pages 78-79 of *A Chess Omnibus*.

Viesca, Andrés Ludovico

Andrés Ludovico Viesca was a Mexican prodigy born in Parras de la Fuente on 8 April 1869. A win against José Martí was published in *El Fígaro* of 8 October 1893. See pages 52-53 of *Chess Explorations*.

Wahrburg, David

At the age of 14 David Wahrburg of Stuyvesant High School drew against Capablanca in a simultaneous display at the Manhattan Chess Club, as reported on page 42 of the March 1922 *American Chess Bulletin*.

White, Robert C.

According to pages 73-75 of the April 1917 *American Chess Bulletin*, at the age of 12 Robert C. White held Frank Marshall to a draw in a 144-board simultaneous exhibition in Buffalo on 8 March 1917. See page 130 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves*.

Woolf, George William

Born in South Hackney, London on 22 October 1893, and the subject of a feature, including a game, on pages 414-415 of the October 1901 *BCM*. See page 53 of *Chess Explorations*.



George William Woolf

Zaremba, Paul D.

A photograph of Paul D. Zaremba at the age of 21 months was published on page 39 of the February 1932 *American Chess Bulletin*. See also page 143 of *A Chess Omnibus*.



Paul D. Zaremba